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THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Hallowing of Time

July 9, 2000

John M. Buchanan

see other Sabbath sermon or alt.

"The solution of mankind's most vexing problems will not be found in renouncing technical civilization, but in attaining some degree of independence from it," writes Heschel. Sabbath keeping teaches that independence. Refraining from work on a regular basis is a way of setting limits on behavior that is perilous for both human welfare and the welfare of the earth itself. Overworked Americans need rest, *and* they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and that their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things. Moreover, the planet needs a rest from human plucking and burning and buying and selling. Perhaps, as Sabbath keepers, we will come to live and know these truths more fully, and thus to bring their wisdom to the common solution of humanity's problems."

Dorothy C. Bass
Practicing Our Faith

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THE HALLOWING OF TIME
JULY 9, 2000
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Exodus 20:8-10 (NRSV)
Mark 2: 23-3:6 (NRSV)

" . . .The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; . . ." (Mark 2:27) (NRSV)

Dear God, we have been busy all week long. We have been so busy we have forgotten you, and we're grateful that you have not forgotten us. Hallow this time with your presence. Help us—for we need help—to stop working long enough to enjoy what we have accomplished, to see and acknowledge and rejoice in the gifts of creation you have given us. Startle us with your truth, and your love and your grace. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

My instructor in the Keeping Sabbath, the art of hallowing time, was not on the faculty of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Nor was he a certified spiritual Director giving relaxation workshops on the weekends in hotel ballrooms. He was, in fact, a foreman in the East Chicago Inland Steel plant. His name was Mike Paddock, of Eastern European extraction, about 5'4", and his wife, Edna, was the treasurer of the tiny congregation I was serving as a student minister. Mike also raised chickens and kept a huge garden. In addition, he was the head usher—the only usher on most Sundays. Edna wrote my salary check twice a month and Mike would deliver it, along with two dozen eggs, a shopping bag full of tomatoes and honey dew melons, and sometimes a loaf or two of bread he picked up at the store on the way into town. Mike and Edna had no children. We were it for them, I guess, and ours became their surrogate grandchildren. I recall the occasion, around Christmas, when in addition to the eggs, melons, bread and salary check, Mike awkwardly brought out two tiny dresses he had stopped to purchase at the little shop in town.

Mike's "Hallowing Time and Sabbath keeping seminar," I recall, occurred on a spring Saturday morning when he saw my car at the church and stopped to deliver the check and eggs and melons. His opening was typically straight, simple, blunt and absolutely relevant. "What the hell are you doing here on Saturday morning?""Well, Mr. Paddock," I stammered, "I'm here being available to the congregation. I'm pretty much gone all week, at school every day, so Saturday I'm here in case anyone needs me." "Let me tell you something," Mike said. "Nobody needs you today. If they do they'll call you. Nobody wants to see you today. They're busy. They'll see you plenty tomorrow. So go home: cut your grass, wash your car, play with your girls. Get outa here."

The seminar was over. I did what he said and have tried to abide by it ever since. When I have the privilege of speaking to ministers about how to do this job and keep body and soul together, I tell them about Mike Paddock's "Sabbath Keeping, Time-Hallowing" seminar

and how for their own health and sanity and everybody else's, for that matter, they need to give it a rest on Saturday and pay attention to matters other than work.

"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God: you should not do any work." (Exodus 20:8)

One of the tasks every civilization has to accomplish is the organization of time. Descendants of Abraham: Jews, Muslims and Christians have organized time on the basis of a seven day cycle; six days for work and one for rest, a Sabbatarian pattern. Other ancient cultures organized time differently, primarily based on the lunar cycle. The leaders of the French Revolution, fiercely anti-Christian, tried for a while to abandon the whole notion of a seven-day week and failed because the concept seems to be embedded deeply in the foundations of western culture.

It is there in the Biblical tradition from the very beginning. In the creation story, God is busy creating for six days, separating the land from the waters, creating light, fashioning sun and moon and stars, plants, animals, creeping and crawling and flying creatures, a man and a woman. And then it is finished. "And on the seventh day, God finished the work—and rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it." (Genesis 2:2)

That is a different kind of God—a God who rests, and it is a very different notion of creation, which includes as 1/7th of the process, the specific activity of rest and enjoyment.

The God of the Hebrews, Walter Brueggemann quips, says—on Friday night—"I'm not going into the office tomorrow. I'm taking the day off. I've put in long hours every day all week and tomorrow I'm putting my feet up and enjoying all that I've accomplished."

That is a very different God, and when the commandment to observe the Sabbath is given, it is at Sinai, during the Exodus, when the children of Israel have just escaped from their captivity in Egypt. The Sabbath for them is a blessed reminder of their former slavery and their blessed freedom. Brueggemann observes: "slaves don't get a day off—free men and women do."

And it is a life-changing way of thinking: that work is not finished until it is enjoyed in rest. There is a deep and profound and fragile wisdom in that.

A report to the 212th General Assembly of our church two weeks ago issued "An Invitation to Sabbath." In the midst of our obsessive talk about sex—the Invitation to Sabbath seemed like a breath of sanity. It, of course, received no press attention at all and was discussed not at all. The report noted that "There is a deep need today to rediscover the gift of Sabbath . . . even where Sabbath is only a distant memory."

Many of us recall a day when the culture itself supported the idea of a sabbath, when on Sunday the economy slowed and came to a halt. Stores, gas stations, restaurants were closed. Many of us experienced it as oppressive, not allowed to play, confined to the front porch. All of that is gone now. We live in a market place that is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When ministers get together to talk and complain, the most common lament, particularly among suburban pastors with plenty of families, is that Sunday morning is becoming crowded with alternate activities. Soccer leagues schedule games on Sunday mornings. So we live in a different time and place but more critically is the economic vicious cycle that is a pervasive force everywhere in our society.

Economist Juliet Schor wrote a besteller a few years ago, *The Overworked American,* and reported that "work hours and stress are up and sleep and family are down for all classes of employed Americans. Wives working outside the home return to find a 'second shift' of housework waiting for them. Husbands add overtime or second jobs to their schedules. Single parents stretch in so many directions that they sometimes feel they can't manage. Simultaneously, all are bombarded with messages that urge them to spend more (and so, ultimately, to work more), to keep their homes cleaner, and to improve themselves as investors, parents, lovers or athletes. Supposedly to make all this possible, grocery stores stay open all night, entertainment options are available around the clock and the culture offers fast food, time saving devices and exercise machines that promise to burn off fat in a few minutes per day." (Bass, p. 75)

Dorothy Bass, Chicago theologian, in her fine book, *Practicing Our Faith,* worries about our ability to survive—as individuals, as families, as a planet—with finite resources. "How," she asks, "can we live faithfully and with integrity, here where the pace of existence is so fast"—with such high demands and expectations and a finite amount of time. We need Sabbath, she says, "even though we doubt we have time for it."

What has happened to us? Is it really so different today? Those who study us and reflect on the contemporary scene think so. There is an intriguing and occasionally very funny new book which explores the question. The title is *Bobos in Paradise,* written by journalist and social commentator, David Brooks. "Bobos" refers to Bourgeois Bohemians—the two opposite strands of American culture which, Brooks argues, have come together in our time. Bobos define our age. They are the new establishment. The defining characteristic of a Bobo is someone who combines the best of capitalist, upscale, hardworking middle class culture and the down sized, simple, utilitarianism—of the traditional bohemian counter culture. Bobos spend a lot of money to disguise the fact that they have a great deal of money: on kitchens and bathrooms rather than entertainment centers and jewelry, for instance. The most eloquent symbol of Bobo culture may be the SUV. Until recently "sport" and "utility" described very different phenomenon: sport was leisure—fun; utility was work. Bobo culture combines them—sport utility vehicle for which we will spend as much as a racy non-Bobo Corvette.

Brooks observes that distinguished economist Daniel Bell, whose *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* was required reading 20 years ago, was wrong. Bell proposed

that modern Capitalism was built on two contradictory impulses: self-discipline and the desire to acquire and consume. Bell predicted that once people discover that consuming is more fun than self-discipline and work, hedonism would triumph.

It hasn't happened. Brooks observes, "Hedonism of Woodstock mythology has been domesticated and now serves as a management tool for the Fortune 500 . . . Americans haven't adopted European style vacations . . . Instead they pull all-nighters at Microsoft and come in weekends at Ben and Jerry's . . . they approach work with the fervor of missionaries." (p. 137-138)

But there is a rhythm built into us, a yearning. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "On the Sabbath we specifically care for the need of eternity planted in our own soul." And John Calvin, the founder of what we know as the Protestant Ethic—"On the Sabbath we cease our work so God can do God's work in us." On the subject of work, Calvin wrote, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse, not a blessing." (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Invitation to Sabbath*)

One time Jesus and his disciples broke a handful of Sabbath laws by picking and eating grain as they walked through a field on the Sabbath. Pharisees who were watching for just such an infraction, caught him, accused him. He responded first by citing a kind of precedent. King David, after all, had done something similar. But then he said something very important. "The Sabbath is made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath." The whole purpose of this tradition, this commandment, is not simply to add another rule to the list of religious requirements and obligations. It is the nurture and restoring and healing and saving of human life. That's what Jesus cared about—not religious legalism but whole, healthy human beings.

The purpose is not to restrict activity for the sake of restriction. His purpose was never rule book religion for the sake of documenting theological orthodoxy or moral purity. It is always the health and wholeness and happiness of human beings. Dorothy Bass thinks we can do it, and for our health and happiness ought to receive anew this old gift of a Sabbath.

You really don't have to shop on Sunday, she says, a heretical thought here in this hub of consumer capitalism. It might complicate your week but it might also be delightful. You can't stop worrying—but you can avoid—on Sunday—activities guaranteed to make you worry, like paying bills, filling out tax returns, making lists of things to do.

There is, I discovered, a wonderful prayer which observant Jews use on the Sabbath. It begins, "Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles." (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Invitation to Sabbath*) That's the issue; being so busy we walk sightless among miracles.

It is finally, a deeply theological and spiritual matter. It is finally a matter of grace; a matter of acknowledging that the world does not depend on our activity, that we do not have sole responsibility for the grain growing, or the sun rising or the birds singing; that

there is in and behind all things a steady, creative grace, providing for our needs, continuing the creation.

Poet Wendell Berry, a deeply spiritual man, takes a walk every Sunday morning and then goes homes and writes a Sabbath poem. They are wonderful. Here is one he wrote in 1979:

> **"Whatever is foreseen in joy**
> **Must be lived out from day to day.**
> **Vision held open in the dark**
> **By our ten thousand days of work.**
> **Harvest will fill the barn; for that**
> **The hand must ache, the face must sweat.**
>
> **And yet no leaf or grain is filled**
> **By work of ours; the field is tilled**
> **And left to grace. That we may reap,**
> **Great work is done while we're asleep.**
>
> **When we work well, a Sabbath mood**
> **Rests on our day, and finds it good."**

So, make a Sabbath. Entertain the revolutionary thought that your work includes the necessity of stopping—stepping back—enjoying what you have done.

Create a Sabbath. Keep Sabbath.

God's holy gift to you is time. Cherish it. Rest in it. Enjoy it. Hallow it.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
July 9, 2000
The Reverend John Wilkinson

In the ebb and flow of life, almighty God, your presence is ever with us. In the rhythms of our days, your grace bears, your love nurtures, your hope endures. Whether we walk in the valley of the shadow of death or dance with joyous celebration, your blessed presence sustains us, and for that gift of life, new life made known each new day, life eternal made known in the reconciling ministry of Christ Jesus, we give you thanks. And so we would gather as your children in this place, at this hour, seeking again that ever-present blessing, encountering it as articulated through a prayer's hopeful utterance, through a sermon's fresh insight, through an anthem's rising note or a hymn's anchoring anthem.

And in deeper ways we encounter that word again and again and again, through the laughter of a child, through the touch of a beloved one, through crashing wave or blossoming petunia or blasting siren – your grace which called the world into being and your love which offers us belonging and gives us meaning. And so through the very power of that word we gather our hopes and fears, our dreams and aspirations, our longings and belongings, and place them before your throne of grace, knowing that these concerns are known well to you, and knowing that you will respond in the rhythm of your time and the rhythm of your heart. We pray for the world, gracious God, the world you created and called good and the world you intend to live with justice and righteousness. And so as tensions rise in Northern Ireland, deliver with clarity your message of reconciliation.

Break through centuries old divisions with your vision of peace. Bring peace to places like Chechnya and Iran. As Mexico faces a new political era, allow notions of fairness and hopefulness to seize this new opportunity. We pray for our own nation as it moves toward a presidential election. Be with those who would seek that high office. Give them, and their supporters, integrity of mission and a sense of the common good, that in the upcoming months this campaign season might reflect the best of who we are and the best of who you would have us to be. We pray for children in these summer months, for recreation workers and teachers and lifeguards and parents and caregivers. Keep children safe from harm's way, that they might grow in love and hope and joy. And we would pray for those facing particular challenge – challenge of body, of mind, of spirit.

Bring your healing touch to all those who hurt this day, to those who mourn, to those who grieve. Ease their pain and allow us to be messengers of such healing. And in a silent moment, loving God, hear now the collection of our own prayers, gathered in the symphony of this congregation, of congregations around the world, as we seek again your presence. [silence] Allow us to abide in your good news this day, gracious God, for we make this prayer in the name of Jesus, who journeys with us and who gives us life, praying together words he shared with his earlier followers, saying…